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INFO RUEHHI/AMEMBASSY HANOI PRIORITY 1156  
RUEHZS/ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS  
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SIPDIS

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E.O. 12958: N/A  
TAGS: PHUM KIRF PGOV VM  
SUBJECT: HCMC LICENSES 25 HOUSE CHURCHES

¶1. (U) The Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA) October 17 announced that by the end of October, 25 Protestant house church congregations will be registered to operate in the city. Some of the licenses will be handed out in ceremonies that will be held October 20 and 24. According to the CRA, these licenses will enable members of the congregations to gather, pray, hold services, and study the Bible at their places of worship. The CRA said that more congregations, including one belonging to the Mormon Church, are now filling out registration applications for the next round of licensing, the date of which is yet to be announced.

¶2. (SBU) Our CRA contact told us that local operation licenses would be granted directly to the house churches by People's Committees at the ward and district levels. He acknowledged that HCMC is the first place in Vietnam to issue such licenses and added that the process will continue as soon as more house churches complete registration applications. The contact said that local registration of congregations was required before the GVN would consider registering churches at the national level. (Note: National registration of churches would legalize such church activities as the appointment of clergy, the gathering of multiple congregations, training programs, and international exchanges. End Note.) The CRA official said local licensing would help the GVN monitor house church activities and properties, and would aid in the national registration process.

¶3. (U) The 25 congregations to be granted licenses belong to the following 21 denominations:

Israel Church  
Vietnam Baptist Fellowship  
Trung Tin Baptist Church  
Jehovah's Witness Church  
Agape Outreach Church  
Baptist Evangelistic League of Vietnam  
Trinity Baptist Church  
Outreach to Asia Nationals  
Vietnam Baptist Convention  
Church of God  
Vietnamese Outreach Church  
Timothy Gospel Church  
Chinese House Church  
Grace Baptist Church  
Revival Ecclesia Mission  
Vietnam More Than Conqueror Church  
Jerusalem Church  
Burning Bush Gospel Church  
Emmanuel Church  
Heaven Blessing Church  
Church of God International

¶4. (SBU) Pastor Pham Dinh Nhan, Chairman of the Vietnam Evangelical Fellowship (VEF), an umbrella organization of house churches in southern Vietnam, told us he thought the HCMC licensing showed a "more open attitude" towards Protestant house

churches. Although Pastor Nhan had earlier demanded that house churches with activities in many provinces only be obligated to register at the national level, some VEF house churches in HCMC are among those that will receive licenses. Pastor Nhan said this move by the HCMC CRA would encourage more VEF churches to apply for local licenses. Pastor Nhan remains concerned, however, about the licensing procedures being followed in other provinces, which require congregations to submit lists of members as part of the application process. He said such lists could be used by police to harass churchgoers.

¶15. (SBU) Pastor Nguyen Ngoc Hien (also known as Pastor Henry) of the Vietnam Baptist Fellowship said the licensing is a step the GVN should have taken "a long time ago." Pastor Hien shared Pastor Nhan's concern regarding the requirement of some provinces to submit lists of church members as part of the application process. Pastor Hien noted that HCMC authorities did not have the same requirement, and that the Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV) did not have to submit the names of its followers when it was recognized several years ago.

¶16. (SBU) Comment: The licensing of these 25 congregations is a significant and encouraging development for Protestant house churches in HCMC. Also significant is the positive response from house church leaders like Pastor Nhan, who in the past have been reluctant to work with Vietnamese authorities. The fact that more VEF house churches plan to apply for licenses represents a real step forward in relations between the churches and government. Challenges remain, however, including whether other provinces will follow HCMC's lead, whether those provinces will continue to insist on lists of names, and whether such lists, if submitted, will be used against churchgoers.

WINNICK